

Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*

STORIES OF pious children tend to be false. This may be because they are told by adults, who see virtue where their subjects would see only a practical course of action; or it may be because such stories are written to edify and what is written to edify usually ends by amusing. For my part, I have never cared to read about little boys who build altars and play they are priests, or about little girls who dress up as nuns, or about those pious Protestant children who lack this equipment but brighten the corners where they are.

Last spring I received a letter from Sister Evangelist, the Sister Superior of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home in Atlanta. "This is a strange request," the letter read, "but we will try to tell our story as briefly as possible. In 1949, a little three-year-old girl, Mary Ann, was admitted to our Home as a patient. She proved to be a remarkable child and lived until she was twelve. Of those nine years, much is to be told. Patients, visitors, Sisters, all were influenced in some way by this afflicted child. Yet one never thought of her as afflicted. True she had been born with a tumor on the side of her face; one eye had been removed, but the other eye sparkled, twinkled, danced mischievously, and after one meeting one never was conscious of her physical defect but recognized only the beautiful brave spirit and felt the joy of such contact. Now Mary Ann's story should be written but who to write it?"

Not me, I said to myself.

"We have had offers from nuns and others but we don't want a pious little recital. We want a story with a real impact on other lives just as Mary Ann herself had that impact on each life she touched . . . This wouldn't have to be a factual story. It could be a novel with many other characters but the outstanding character, Mary Ann."

A novel, I thought. Horrors.

Sister Evangelist ended by inviting me to write Mary Ann's story and to come up and spend a few days at the Home in Atlanta and "imbibe the atmosphere" where the little girl had lived for nine years.

It is always difficult to get across to people who are not professional writers that a talent to write does not mean a talent to write anything at all. I did not wish to imbibe Mary Ann's atmosphere. I was not capable of writing her story. Sister Evangelist had enclosed a picture of the child. I had glanced at it when I first opened the letter, and had put it quickly aside. Now I picked it up to give it a last cursory look before returning it to the Sisters. It showed a little girl in her first Communion dress and veil. She was sitting on a bench, holding something I could not make out. Her small face was straight and bright on one side. The other side was protuberant, the eye was bandaged, the nose and mouth crowded slightly out of place. The child looked out at her observer with an obvious happiness and composure. I continued to gaze at the picture long after I had thought to be finished with it.

After a while I got up and went to the book case and took out a volume of Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories. The Dominican Congregation to which the nuns belong who had taken care of Mary Ann had been founded by Hawthorne's daughter, Rose. The child's picture had brought to mind his story, *The Birthmark*. I found the story and opened it at that wonderful section of dialogue where Alymer first mentions his wife's defect to her.

One day Alymer sat gazing at his wife with a trouble in his countenance that grew stronger until he spoke.

"Georgiana," said he, "has it never occurred to you that the mark upon your cheek might be removed?"

"No, indeed," said she, smiling; but perceiving the seriousness of his manner, she blushed deeply. "To tell you the truth it has been so often called a charm that I was simple enough to imagine it might be so."

"Ah, upon another face perhaps it might," replied her husband, "but never on yours. No, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature that this slightest defect, which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty, shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection."

"Shocks you, my husband!" cried Georgiana, deeply

hurt, at first reddening with momentary anger, but then bursting into tears. "Then why did you take me from my mother's side? You cannot love what shocks you!"

The defect on Mary Ann's cheek could not have been mistaken for a charm. It was plainly grotesque. She belonged to fact and not to fancy. I conceived it my duty to write Sister Evangelist that if anything were written about this child, it should indeed be a "factual story," and I went on to say that if anyone should write these facts, it should be the Sisters themselves, who had known and nursed her. I felt this strongly. At the same time I wanted to make it plain that I was not the one to write the factual story, and there is no quicker way to get out of a job than to prescribe it for those who have prescribed it for you. I added that should they decide to take my advice, I would be glad to help them with the preparation of their manuscript and do any small editing that proved necessary. I had no doubt that this was safe generosity. I did not expect to hear from them again.

In *Our Old Home*, Hawthorne tells about a fastidious gentleman who, while going through a Liverpool workhouse, was followed by a wretched and rheumy child, so awful-looking that he could not decide what sex it was. The child followed him about until it decided to put itself in front of him in a mute appeal to be held. The fastidious gentleman, after a pause that was significant for himself, picked it up and held it. Hawthorne comments upon this:

Nevertheless, it could be no easy thing for him to do, he being a person burdened with more than an Englishman's customary reserve, shy of actual contact with human beings, afflicted with a peculiar distaste for whatever was ugly, and, furthermore, accustomed to that habit of observation from an insulated standpoint which is said (but I hope erroneously) to have the tendency of putting ice into the blood.

So I watched the struggle in his mind with a good deal of interest, and am seriously of the opinion that he did a heroic act and effected more than he dreamed of toward his

final salvation when he took up the loathsome child and caressed it as tenderly as if he had been its father.

What Hawthorne neglected to add is that he was the gentleman who did this. His wife, after his death, published his notebooks in which there was this account of the incident:

After this, we went to the ward where the children were kept, and, on entering this, we saw, in the first place, two or three unlovely and unwholesome little imps, who were lazily playing together. One of them (a child about six years old, but I know not whether girl or boy) immediately took the strangest fancy for me. It was a wretched, pale, half-torpid little thing, with a humor in its eye which the Governor said was the scurvy. I never saw, till a few moments afterward, a child that I should feel less inclined to fondle. But this little sickly, humor-eaten fright prowled around me, taking hold of my skirts, following at my heels, and at last held up its hands, smiled in my face, and standing directly before me, insisted on my taking it up! Not that it said a word, for I rather think it was underwitted, and could not talk; but its face expressed such perfect confidence that it was going to be taken up and made much of, that it was impossible not to do it. It was as if God had promised the child this favor on my behalf, and that I must needs fulfill the contract. I held my undesirable burden a little while, and after setting the child down, it still followed me, holding two of my fingers and playing with them, just as if it were a child of my own. It was a foundling, and out of all human kind it chose me to be its father! We went upstairs into another ward; and on coming down again there was this same child waiting for me, with a sickly smile around its defaced mouth, and in its dim-red eyes . . . I should never have forgiven myself if I had repelled its advances.

Rose Hawthorne, Mother Alphonsa in religious life, later wrote that the account of this incident in the Liverpool workhouse seemed to her to contain the greatest words her father ever wrote.

The work of Hawthorne's daughter is perhaps known by

few in this country where it should be known by all. She discovered much that he sought, and fulfilled in a practical way the hidden desires of his life. The ice in the blood which he feared, and which this very fear preserved him from, was turned by her into a warmth which initiated action. If he observed, fearfully but truthfully; if he acted, reluctantly but firmly, she charged ahead, secure in the path his truthfulness had outlined for her.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, she became aware of the plight of the cancerous poor in New York and was stricken by it. Charity patients with incurable cancer were not kept in the city hospitals but were sent to Blackwell's Island or left to find their own place to die. In either case, it was a matter of being left to rot. Rose Hawthorne Lathrop was a woman of great force and energy. A few years earlier she had become a Catholic and had since been seeking the kind of occupation that would be a practical fulfillment of her conversion. With almost no money of her own, she moved into a tenement in the worst section of New York and began to take in incurable cancer patients. She was joined later by a young portrait painter, Alice Huber, whose steady and patient qualities complemented her own forceful and exuberant ones. With their concerted effort, the grueling work prospered. Eventually other women came to help them and they became a congregation of nuns in the Dominican Order—the Servants of Relief for Incurable Cancer. There are now seven of their free cancer homes over the country.

Mother Alphonsa inherited a fair share of her father's literary gift. Her account of the grandson of her first patient makes fine reading. He was a lad who, for reasons unpreventable, had been brought to live for a while in the tenement apartment with his ailing grandmother and the few other patients there at the time.

The boy was brought by an officer of the institution, to remain for a visit. My first glance at his rosy, healthy, clever face struck a warning shiver through my soul. He was a flourishing slip from criminal roots. His eyes had the sturdy gaze of satanic vigor . . . I began to teach him the catechism. With the utmost good nature he sat in front of me

as long as I would sit, giving correct answers. "He likes to study it better than to be idle," said his grandmother; "and I taught it to him myself, long ago." His eyes took on a mystic vagueness during these lessons, and I felt certain he would tell the truth in future and be gentle instead of barbaric.

Food was hidden away in dark corners for the cherubic, overfed pet, and his pranks and thefts were shielded and denied, and the nice clothing which I provided him with, out of our stores, with a new suit for Sundays, strangely disappeared when Willie went to call upon his mother . . . In a few weeks Willie had become famous in the neighborhood as the worst boy it had ever experienced, although it was lined with little scoundrels. The inmates of the house and adjacent shanties feared him, the scoundrels made circles around him as he flew from one escapade to another on the diabolical street which was never free from some sort of outrages perpetrated by young or old. Willie built fires upon the shed roofs, threw bricks that guardian angels alone averted from our heads, and actually hit several little boys at sundry times, whom we mended in the Relief Room. He uttered exclamations that hideously rang in the ears of the profane themselves . . . He delighted in the pictures of the saints which I gave him, stole those I did not give, and sold them all. I preached affectionately, and he listened tenderly, and promised to "remember," and was very sorry for his sins when he had been forced by an iron grasp to accept their revelation. He made a very favorable impression upon an experienced priest who was summoned to rescue his soul; and he built a particularly large bonfire on our woodshed when let go. The poor grandmother began to have severe hemorrhages, because of the shocks she received and the scoldings she gave. Before he came she used to call him "that little angel." Now she wisely declared that he was good-hearted.

Bad children are harder to endure than good ones, but they are easier to read about, and I congratulated myself on having minimized the possibility of a book about Mary Ann by suggesting that the Sisters do it themselves. Although I heard

from Sister Evangelist that they were about it, I felt that a few attempts to capture Mary Ann in writing would lead them to think better of the project. It was doubtful that any of them had the literary gifts of their foundress. Moreover, they were busy nurses and had their hands full following a strenuous vocation.

Their manuscript arrived the first of August. After I had gathered myself together, I sat down and began to read it. There was everything about the writing to make the professional writer groan. Most of it was reported, very little was rendered; at the dramatic moment—where there was one—the observer seemed to fade away, and where an exact word or phrase was needed, a vague one was usually supplied. Yet when I had finished reading, I remained for some time, the imperfections of the writing forgotten, thinking about the mystery of Mary Ann. They had managed to convey it.

The story was as unfinished as the child's face. Both seemed to have been left, like creation on the seventh day, to be finished by others. The reader would have to make something of the story as Mary Ann had made something of her face.

She and the Sisters who had taught her had fashioned from her unfinished face the material of her death. The creative action of the Christian's life is to prepare his death in Christ. It is a continuous action in which this world's goods are utilized to the fullest, both positive gifts and what Père Teilhard de Chardin calls "passive diminishments." Mary Ann's diminishment was extreme, but she was equipped by natural intelligence and by a suitable education, not simply to endure it, but to build upon it. She was an extraordinarily rich little girl.

Death is the theme of much modern literature. There is *Death in Venice*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Death in the Afternoon*, *Death of a Man*. Mary Ann's was the death of a child. It was simpler than any of these, yet infinitely more knowing. When she entered the door of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Home in Atlanta, she fell into the hands of women who are shocked at nothing and who love life so much that they spend their own lives making comfortable those who have been pronounced incurable of cancer. Her own prognosis was six

months, but she lived twelve years, long enough for the Sisters to teach her what alone could have been of importance to her. Hers was an education for death, but not one carried on obtrusively. Her days were full of dogs and party dresses, of Sisters and sisters, of Coca Colas and Dagwood sandwiches, and of her many and varied friends—from Mr. Slack and Mr. Connolly to Lucius, the yard man; from patients afflicted the way she was to children who were brought to the Home to visit her and were perhaps told when they left to think how thankful they should be that God had made their faces straight. It is doubtful if any of them were as fortunate as Mary Ann.

The Sisters had set all this down artlessly and had devoted a good deal of their space to detailing Mary Ann's many pious deeds. I was tempted to edit away a good many of these. They had willingly given me the right to cut and I could have laid about me with satisfaction but for the fact that there was nothing with which to fill in any gaps I created. I felt too that while their style had been affected by traditional hagiography and even a little by Parson Weems, what they had set down was what had happened and there was no way to get around it. This was a child brought up by seventeen nuns; she was what she was, and the itchy hand of the fiction writer would have to be stayed. I was only capable of dealing with another Willie.

I later suggested to Sister Evangelist, on an occasion when some of the Sisters came down to spend the afternoon with me to discuss the manuscript, that Mary Ann could not have been much *but* good, considering her environment. Sister Evangelist leaned over the arm of her chair and gave me a look. Her eyes were blue and unpredictable behind spectacles that unmoored them slightly. "We've had some demons!" she said, and a gesture of her hand dismissed my ignorance.

After an afternoon with them, I decided that they had had about everything and flinched before nothing, even though one of them asked me during the course of the visit why I wrote about such grotesque characters, why the grotesque (of all things) was my vocation. They had in the meantime inspected some of my writing. I was struggling to get off the hook she had me on when another of our guests supplied the

one answer that would make it immediately plain to all of them. "It's your vocation too," he said to her.

This opened up for me also a new perspective on the grotesque. Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing down that will soften their real look. When we look into the face of good, we are liable to see a face like Mary Ann's, full of promise.

Bishop Hyland preached Mary Ann's funeral sermon. He said that the world would ask why Mary Ann should die. He was thinking undoubtedly of those who had known her and knew that she loved life, knew that her grip on a hamburger had once been so strong that she had fallen through the back of a chair without dropping it, or that some months before her death, she and Sister Loretta had got a real baby to nurse. The Bishop was speaking to her family and friends. He could not have been thinking of that world, much farther removed yet everywhere, which would not ask why Mary Ann should die, but why she should be born in the first place.

One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited His goodness, you are done with Him. The Aylmers whom Hawthorne saw as a menace have multiplied. Busy cutting down human imperfection, they are making headway also on the raw material of good. Ivan Karamazov cannot believe, as long as one child is in torment; Camus' hero cannot accept the divinity of Christ, because of the massacre of the innocents. In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror.

It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.

These reflections seem a long way from the simplicity and innocence of Mary Ann; but they are not so far removed. Hawthorne could have put them in a fable and shown us what to fear. In the end, I cannot think of Mary Ann without thinking also of that fastidious, sceptical New Englander who feared the ice in his blood. There is a direct line between the incident in the Liverpool workhouse, the work of Hawthorne's daughter, and Mary Ann—who stands not only for herself but for all the other examples of human imperfection and grotesquerie which the Sisters of Rose Hawthorne's order spend their lives caring for. Their work is the tree sprung from Hawthorne's small act of Christlikeness and Mary Ann is its flower. By reason of the fear, the search, and the charity that marked his life and influenced his daughter's, Mary Ann inherited, a century later, the wealth of Catholic wisdom that taught her what to make of her death. Hawthorne gave what he did not have himself.

This action by which charity grows invisibly among us, entwining the living and the dead, is called by the Church the Communion of Saints. It is a communion created upon human imperfection, created from what we make of our grotesque state. Of hers Mary Ann made what, like all good things, would have escaped notice had not the Sisters and many others been affected by it and wished it written down. The Sisters who composed the memoir have told me that they feel they have failed to create her as she was, that she was more lively than they managed to make her, more gay, more gracious, but I think that they have done enough and done it well. I think that for the reader this story will illuminate the lines that join the most diverse lives and that hold us fast in Christ.

*Milledgeville,
Georgia*

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